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Urban Ministry and Theological Education

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URBAN MINISTRY AND THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION: AN INTEGRATED APPROACH

Tom Austin

1. The Urban Challenge

Urbanization is happening on every continent, including Africa. It is happening at different rates and at different levels, but that it is happening is undeniable. The overall process in the world is a movement away from the rural areas to the urban areas. The nations, *panta ta ethne*, are moving to the cities.

But the Church has yet to make that move, intellectually, psychologically and strategically. We are unprepared for ministry in the city. Our heritage and our training have not equipped us for the demands of urbanization. And the adjustments we are making are slow and less than strategic. As Roger Greenway says:

> I see the Church of Christ at large as standing right at a crossroad. This is the choice between commitment to the difficult urban battlefield where the hearts and lives of millions are at stake, or withdrawal into isolation from the harsh realities of such a world (Greenway 1989, 2).

The tendency of the Church has been to dabble in urban ministry, to seek to fulfill urban ministry from the suburb and from the compound. We must come to grips with reality, face the challenge squarely and get on with the Great Commission. For this challenge will not go away. We cannot continue to stand outside the city, calling for those inside to come out and join us. The Church must become part of the city, integrated into the city in order to capture the city for the Kingdom of God.

In order to do this, the Church must cooperate in a Kingdom community within the secular city. We must bring a holistic ministry to the whole person. This, of course, takes us beyond our theologies, our liturgies, our offices and our sacraments to their application in the city through quality of life, interpersonal relationships and the work of service (Rooy 1979, 198). Thus the Church is called to live out the reality of the Kingdom within the city.

What does this mean for theological education? Is there some kind of special theological education needed for urban ministry? Do we need to re-evaluate and re-think our own philosophies and strategies and curriculums in light of this challenge to the Church? I think the answer must be yes. Is not the role of theological education to equip the future leaders of the Church to be leaders in every way? As someone has written: "Seminaries must seize the problem of world-class cities and develop a total strategy for meeting the crushing needs of the heart, spirit and body" (Trinity World Forum, Fall 1984). And Roger Greenway has said: "Theological education must provide the theological perspective, practical training, and strong motivation to make the Christian faith a transforming power in the cities throughout the world" (Greenway 1989, 2).

We must equip our students for leadership and responsibility in a Church whose context is changing. As the Church's context of ministry changes more and more from a rural to an urban setting, so too must our patterns of theological education change. The Church is demanding that its leadership be trained for the ministry that is before it in a modern, complex urban world. Sidney Rooy states that we must prepare our students to create a spiritual-corporal community which promotes the reconciliation of men with God and with one another. We should prepare our students to carry out a shared ministry that incorporates each member according to his gifts. The demands of urban ministry require an equipped and mobilized laity. We should prepare our students to re-evaluate their own lives and ministries, and to be flexible enough to change in light of the task and the context of their ministry. We should prepare them to put into action programmes of love and justice (Rooy 1981, 182-193).

> Theological education for urban mission must equip Christians for making their faith a lived-out reality. This requires an education that is contextually aware and a theology of the city that moves beyond pietistic retreat. When Christians enter into a responsible relation with their fellow city dwellers, show what it means to be obedient disciples of Christ, and give a living testimony of faith in Him, urban mission will take on new relevance" (Rooy 1981, 193).

2. An Integrated Approach

Assuming that we have taken the urban challenge seriously, what direction should we take in fitting theological education to help meet that challenge? What courses do we teach, how are they to be taught, and who is to teach them? It seems as if more is needed here than just adding a course or two to an already full course-load, and more is possible. Providing an occasional elective course is a good start, but it is only giving honorable mention to a very urgent need. This will

hardly prepare our students adequately for urban ministry. Even providing an urban track within our degree programmes will not do the job thoroughly enough. It may be extremely beneficial for those few students who have that particular interest, but it will not touch all of the students who truly need this kind of training. Of course providing individual courses in urban ministry is important, even necessary. But this cannot be the whole answer in preparing our students to take on the challenge that will transform the city for Jesus' sake.

I believe that what is needed is a redesigning of our theological education to incorporate an urban ministry perspective into the entire structure of the school. We need to "leaven" the whole programme with an urban influence if we are to do the job right. We need to consider adopting an integrated approach to the task of equipping students for the urban challenge before the Church.

Traditional models of theological education have received much criticism not least because they are so often non-applicable to actual ministry or because they do not provide a unified programme of studies. The answer proposed for such deficiencies has usually been some form of integration--some means of bringing together all the parts of the theological educational process into a single whole, so that everything works in harmony with the surroundings at the same time. This means that the knowledge to be conveyed from many different sources is brought together to form new knowledge and a more holistic view of reality (Clarke 1986, 75). This also means that the theological educational experience is designed as a totality. As Wilson Chow explains, no one aspect is to negate the other, as though the presence of one would imply the absence of the other. All aspects are mutually pervading. This means for theological education that it should be academic, it should be spiritual, and it should be practical. Each aspect should presuppose, imply or contain the others (Chow 1982, 51).

Such an understanding of the task of theological education takes us beyond the educational programmes and the courses we offer. It takes us beyond the internships and the field ministry we require. The concept of integration in theological education embraces the location of the campus, student and faculty housing, chapel programmes, extra-curricular activities of every kind, and all the relational dynamics within the school community.

The reason that all these aspects must be included is that our purpose in theological education is not only to impart knowledge and to prepare our students for a vocation, but also to change or solidify a person's convictions and to help the person develop a biblical philosophy of life and ministry. In order to do that, we must speak to a person's total life, not just to his mind. We want to develop the whole person.

Consequently, we must provide a holistic, integrated approach that touches every aspect of the person's life.

Indeed, this is the nature of the Church's task. The Church seeks to minister to the whole person. It seeks to have a holistic ministry to the individual and to the community. It seeks to minister to people spiritually, physically, psychologically, emotionally and intellectually. Therefore the nature of theological education should be to equip students to have such a holistic ministry. To do this, theological education must provide holistic, integrated training for those students. And if the context of the Church increasingly demands preparation of students for urban ministry, then I suggest that such preparation for urban ministry is best pursued in theological education by means of a holistic, integrated approach.

3. A Strategy for Integration

After coming to grips with the urban challenge, after realizing the role and responsibility of theological education in meeting this challenge, and after acknowledging the desirability of a holistic, integrated approach to preparation for urban ministry, the remaining step is to devise a strategy to meet this challenge.

Put very simply, we need a strategy that will lead to the urbanizing of our theological schools. We need to accept the city, to become a part of the city. We need as schools to allow the city to infiltrate our walls and to become a part of ourselves. We need to begin to listen to the cries of the city with "urban ears", and to see its needs with "urban eyes". We must learn to approach our entire task from an urban perspective.

I would like to propose a plan for the integration of urban ministry into our theological educational programmes, in a three-fold process which would urbanize our institutions throughout. The order of this process is very important. The first step in this plan of integration would be to urbanize the administration and the faculty. This is the foundational step which sets the stage for the rest of the plan. I believe that some of the efforts made in the past have not worked well because this step was not completed, or possibly was never begun. We must realize that unless the entire administration and faculty understand the urban challenge, and are motivated and equipped to be involved in their professional area, as well as in their personal ministries, we will not make the impact that is needed. We must understand that the urban challenge is too large to be left to a few scattered professionals. Everyone in his specialized area has his part to play in urbanizing theological education.

It is important for the administration to be urbanized in order that the administrative structure will support the emphasis of the school. It is the administration of a school that supervises the overall training of the students. By urbanizing the administration, the departments and the area specialists will not work in isolation but will be led to coordinate their programmes with each other. The deans, the field ministry coordinator and others will then provide the leadership to mobilize the school in this common direction and emphasis.

The role of the administration in coordinating and supervising such a process could be formal or informal depending upon the ethos of the school. It seems that the best approach in the beginning would be to cultivate a favourable atmosphere and opportunities for discussion and the sharing of ideas. Later the faculty could be asked in their course evaluations how urban mission was being integrated into their particular courses. As the plan progresses, actual involvement in urban ministry could be strongly encouraged for both faculty and administration personnel.

The faculty as well as the administration must be urbanized, because it is the faculty who determine the content of the courses, and who communicate the purpose and vision of the school. So how do we urbanize the faculty? They must first of all be committed both corporately and individually to facing the urban challenge. To try to bring this integration about without this kind of faculty commitment is only to lay an urban cloak over the atmosphere of the school. Our desire is to permeate the school with an urban perspective. It is, therefore, important that all involved have the opportunity to discuss the new direction and emphasis, to ask questions, to voice concerns, and to give input. Commitment will come more easily when there is a sense of ownership among the faculty.

The process can also move forward more effectively if there is a resource person who could be used to heighten the urban awareness of the faculty and the administration. He would have special training in the field, and motivation to do research, so that he could pass information to other faculty members according to areas of expertise and need. He could make himself available to faculty members to generate ideas and to discuss possible course content changes or additions. He could arrange for speakers, films or even seminars which would help the faculty to grow in their understanding of urban issues and the role of theological education.

Another important step towards urbanizing the faculty would be for them to live and minister in the city. This may not of course be possible for some because of the location of the institution. But wherever possible, the faculty should be encouraged to experience, at least to some degree, the problems and opportunities that the urban minister

experiences. This will remove their teaching in theology, Bible or homiletics from the theoretical to the real world of the urban minister serving in the urban church. They will also see the plight of the urban dweller and be able to provide a more personal and compassionate example to their students.

The principle is this: "to minister one must know the city, not only generally and theoretically, but specifically and personally" (Scanlon 1984, 175). This principle must be emphasized for theological educators as well as for ministers. To convey the vision for urban ministry, we must have the vision. To inform others about the issues of urban ministry, we must be informed. To train others for urban ministry, we must be experienced in urban ministry. With an urbanized and mobilized faculty and administration, the plan of integration is only a matter of time and process.

The second step in the plan of integrating is to urbanize the curriculum. In a sense we can say that the curriculum of a theological institution is the total programme in context. This means that not only do we offer courses in urban ministry, but even more importantly, we bring the urban emphasis into the existing courses. It means that we expose our students to the realities of African urbanization throughout our programme.

We need to present the city as strategic both in the Bible and in Church history. We need to teach the theology of the city in our theology courses. We must let the city have its biblical place in our ecclesiology, our eschatology, and even our Christology. We must let the city have its biblical place in our practical theology as well. We must teach and model how to evangelize, disciple, counsel, motivate, preach to and pastor the urban dweller. We must teach how to plant and grow a church in an urban setting. All of this can be taught in the classroom, but it also needs to be modeled and experienced in the city. Field ministry and field-based education, as well as internships, would be extremely valuable in this connection. Beyond the classroom, the student should receive supervised experience in urban ministry.

There are also many other activities of a school which should be fitted into the programme for educating the students for urban ministry, including chapel programmes, forums, seminars, retreats, conferences, special workshops, days of prayer, and so forth. Campus relationships are also very important as part of an urbanized curriculum. Faculty and students should discuss urban issues at tea or at meals, whether on campus, in restaurants, or in homes. This extremely valuable method can be used to clarify issues, to solve problems, to expand areas for discussion, and to bring greater cultural insights for ministry (Clarke 1986, 76).

In our curricular programme, the city becomes our laboratory. It is where we put into practice our theory and our ideas. Sidney Rooy suggests that learning the context of the ministry should be the first course in theological education. It is essential for effective education and for effective ministry (Rooy 1979, 203). Our campuses may be "hallowed ground," but the city is not. So our curriculum must provide our students with the practical training and experience in the urban context that would help to make their future ministries more effective and more fruitful.

The third and final step of the plan of integration is to urbanize the students. This is nothing more than the urbanized faculty and administration applying the urbanized curriculum to the student community of the institution. This is done by transmission and praxis, by instruction and experience. Learning should not only come from lectures and textbooks, but also from experiences and relationships with faculty, other students, people in the community, the urban culture itself, and from actual ministry in the city (Clarke 1986, 80). By experiencing the city, students would be able to identify its problems and to see needs of the urban dweller. They would begin to wrestle with how the city and the Church can solve the problems and meet the needs. They would learn how to proclaim the gospel, how to provide community, and how to serve in the city. They would learn how to stimulate other Christians to urban ministry through communicating and demonstrating their own vision and purpose.

Conclusion

If the projections for African urbanization are correct, it would seem that we are not hopelessly behind in equipping the leadership of the Church for urban ministry. However, the next few years are crucial for us. We must start now with a major, well-planned thrust towards an integrated approach to urbanization in our theological schools. It is important that we continue to discuss and to think together. Yet it is equally important that we begin to act together. May the Lord give us wisdom and courage as we "stand in the gap" for the great cities across this continent.

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